

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

Dispatches from the Boxer Rebellion *U.S. Minister Edwin Conger and Secretary of State John Hay, 1900*

UNITED STATES LEGATION TO CHINA

MR. CONGER TO MR. HAY
PEKIN, JULY 16, 1900.

[Telegram—Received in cipher through Chinese Minister. . . Sent July 16, but bearing no date when received.]

For one month we have been besieged in British legation under continued shot and shell from Chinese troops. Quick relief only can prevent general massacre.

CONGER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

MR. HAY TO MR. CONGER
WASHINGTON, JULY 21, 1900.

[Telegram—Cipher. Sent through the Chinese minister.]

Dispatch received. Authenticity doubted. Answer this, giving your sister's name. Report attitude and position of Chinese Government.

HAY

UNITED STATES LEGATION TO CHINA

MR. CONGER TO MR. HAY
PEKIN, AUGUST 9, 1900.

[Telegram—Paraphrase. Received August 14, 1900, through Chinese Legation. Date of sending lost in transmission]

(Mr. Conger reports that they are being fired upon daily by imperial troops. Their losses are 60 killed and 120 wounded. Have reached half portion of horse flesh, and have food for only a fortnight. Six children have died and many others are sick.)

UNITED STATES LEGATION TO CHINA

MR. CONGER TO MR. HAY
PEKIN, AUGUST 16, 1900.

SIR: I have the honor to confirm on the overleaf my telegram of the 14th instant, and to say that 2,000 Americans, 2,000 British, 8,000 Japanese, 3,000 Russian, and 200 French troops are now in the city, and we are safe.

At the gates through which the United States and British troops entered there was not serious resistance, but the Russian and Japanese had considerable fighting. The entire city is not yet in our possession. The "Forbidden City" and the northeast sections are still held by the Chinese.

Yesterday, in order to drive the enemy out of shooting distance from the legation, General Chaffee fought his way some distance into the "Forbidden City," but after a conference with the other generals he withdrew his men. He had lost Captain Riley and 6 men killed and several wounded. I am informed this was done because the Russian and Japanese generals thought a sacred place like an imperial palace ought not to be forcibly taken without first making a formal demand for surrender. * * *

As I have heretofore wired, we have lost 7 marines killed and 17 wounded, 4 still in hospital; and 1 child died. The rest of the Americans are alive, but many children are ill. Shall start most of them homeward soon.

I have the honor to be, etc.,

E. H. CONGER

UNITED STATES LEGATION TO CHINA

MR. CONGER TO MR. HAY
PEKIN, AUGUST 17, 1900.

SIR: Continuing my dispatch of the 16th instant, I have the honor to confirm on the overleaf my cipher telegram of to-day, your telegram, undated, sent through Mr. Wu Ting-fang and delivered to me under a flag of truce by a messenger from the *Tsungli Yamen*, my reply thereto of July 16th, and also my telegrams of August 3, 5, 9, and 11.

Your telegram was the first communication received by anyone from outside since the siege began, and mine the first sent out. On the next day some of the other ministers sent telegrams to the *Tsungli Yamen*, asking that they be forwarded as mine had been. They were, however, returned with the reply that mine had been transmitted under a previous arrangement, which it was not possible to repeat. A few days later the British minister received through the *Tsungli Yamen* an inquiry from his Government much the same sort as your first telegram to me. They said he could answer and that the rest of us also might send messages; hence mine of August 5. They had heretofore requested us to send "*en clair*" telegrams to our Governments, who must be very anxious about us, simply saying "all are well," which we refused to do. * * *

My telegram of August 11 was sent because of the receipt by the dean of the diplomatic corps of certain notes from the *Tsungli Yamen* . . . concerning our quitting Peking, and was chiefly for the purpose of gaining time for the relief column to arrive. The Chinese Government had, since June 19, been continually insisting upon our leaving Peking under Chinese escort, to which we were determined never to consent, because it was undoubtedly a plan to ambush us. This may be more easily believed, since the identical officers and soldiers who were, by imperial orders, daily shooting us down had been selected as our escort. So by one excuse and another we put off a final decision or definite refusal, as may be seen by the copies of correspondence enclosed.

Returning to the situation at the time of my dispatch of June 18 (No. 393), on [June] 19th, at 4 p.m., each minister received an identical note, whether or not their Governments had sent troops into China, ordering us to leave Peking within twenty-four hours, promising adequate protection, etc. Resolving among ourselves that we would never go under a Chinese escort, but deeming it wise not to refuse point blank, and thus give them ground for attack, we replied courteously, declaring it impossible to leave within the time, and requesting an interview at 9 o'clock the next morning with the prince and ministers at the *yamen*, opening the way for further

discussion. The reply accomplished its purpose. The time was postponed temporarily, as will be seen by copy of correspondence enclosed.

The morning of the 20th, at 8:30, the ministers met at the French legation ready to proceed in a body to the *Tsungli Yamen* as soon as notified that the prince would be there. Not receiving any word by 9 o'clock, the German minister, Baron von Ketteler, who had personally notified the *yamen* that he was coming there on business, started with his interpreter, commissioned to tell the prince and ministers that the corps was patiently waiting to hear from them.

Upon arriving almost to the *yamen* he was brutally murdered, shot through the head by a man (so says his interpreter, whose chair immediately followed) wearing the insignia of a Chinese official. The interpreter, Mr. Cordes, was at the same time seriously wounded, but succeeded in escaping to the American Methodist Mission compound, which was guarded by American marines. Two *mafoos* [stable hands] accompanied the baron, one of whom immediately ran to the *Tsungli Yamen* and returned with some of the secretaries to the place, to find the official chairs demolished, but the minister's body already taken away. The other returned quickly to the legation, and an officer and 20 men started for the spot, but before they reached it were met by a strong cordon of Chinese soldiers, through which they were not strong enough to pass. The body was found yesterday, buried in a rough coffin near where he fell, and to-day was decently interred in the German legation. This was the last attempt of any of the ministers to visit the *Tsungli Yamen*.

The Chinese army had turned out against us; the whole quarter of the city in which the legations are situated was surrounded by its soldiers, firing began on all sides and the battle against the representatives of all foreign governments in China was begun.

The Methodist compound where all our missionaries had gathered was abandoned; all coming to the legation at 12 noon. By 4 o'clock the situation had become so acute that all foreigners, except the guards and a few men in each legation, repaired to the British legation, and the refugee native Christians, about 2,000, were placed in the grounds of Prince Su, nearby.

Our lines of defense were quickly shortened and strengthened, trenches and barricades built, and the siege was on.

Four hundred foreigners, 200 of them women and children, with over 100 soldiers, were crowded into the British legation. In the house given to our legation 30 people were for two months crowded into six small rooms; but all were thankful that there existed so convenient and safe a place to go.

The first attempts of the enemy were to burn us out by firing buildings adjoining us, but by means of heroically fighting those inflamed by the enemy, burning and tearing down others ourselves, we soon had the British legation pretty safe from this danger. However, from this date until July 17 there was scarcely an hour during which there was not firing upon some part of our lines and into some of the legations, varying from a single shot to a general and continuous attack along the whole line.

Artillery was planted on all sides of us, two large guns mounted on the walls surrounding the palace, and thousands of 3-inch shells and solid shot hurled at us. There is scarcely a building in any of the legations that was not struck, and some of them practically destroyed. Four shells struck our gatehouse, tearing away our flagstaff; four exploded in the servants' quarters; three struck my residence, two of them exploding inside; two struck the office building, and two the house of Mr. Cheshire, while the roofs of nearly all the buildings in the compound were badly damaged by innumerable bullets. To show in what storms they came, five quarts of them were picked up to be remolded into new ammunition in one hour in our small compound.

Our lines were at first made as short as possible and enclosed all the legations except the Belgian, and were still further shortened after the burning of the Austrian, Italian, and Dutch legations and the imperial customs. Trenches were dug, streets barricaded along these lines as fast as possible, but nearly all the work on these had to be done under cover of darkness.

A veritable fortress was made of the British legation, walls were strengthened and raised, openings filled, bombproof cellars constructed, counter tunnels to prevent mining made, and everything possible with our poor tools and materials was effectively done. In our first barricades carts and furniture were employed and thousands upon thousands of sand bags made in which every obtainable material was used—satin *portières*, silk curtains, carpets, oriental rugs, table linen, towels, bedding, embroideries, cloths, silks, etc.

Fortunately for us we had the missionaries and their converts with us. The former, being familiar with the Chinese language and character, ably organized, superintended, and directed the Chinese,

who were invaluable help in constructing fortifications, and without which it could not have been done.

All were industrious and helpful, but everyone will agree that no one is done any injustice if Rev. F. D. Gamewell, of the American Methodist Mission, is mentioned as the man to whose practical intelligence, quick perception, executive ability, untiring energy, and sleepless activity more than any other is due our successful and safe resistance. We were obliged to combine all our force and efforts for defense, so that neither time, strength, provisions, nor ammunition should be wasted.

Sir Claude MacDonald, the British minister, was chosen for the general command, and gave every satisfaction. He selected Mr. H. G. Squiers, first secretary of this legation, as his chief of staff, whose military training and experience had not been forgotten, but which, thrown with energy and determination into the work, were invaluable to the end.

Necessary committees were created, and the camp was thoroughly organized. Stores of wheat, rice, and coal found within our lines were quickly gathered into a general commissariat, which, with such canned goods as we had in store, together with all our riding horses and cart mules, have furnished us a substantial if not a very palatable subsistence since.

The Chinese seem to have an innumerable soldiery and an inexhaustible supply of ammunition. We began with only 400 marines, sailors, and soldiers altogether, and some 50 miscellaneous armed civilians. For the most part, therefore, we simply sat and watched, firing only when necessary; but occasionally a severe attack had to be resisted or a sortie made, which invariably, on our side, was successful. But these frequently cost lives of brave men. Altogether we have lost—killed, 65; wounded, 135; died of disease, all children, 7. Of the United States, marines, Sergeant Fanning and Privates King, Kennedy, Turner, Tutcher, Fisher, and Thomas were killed; Captain Myers, Dr. Lippett, and 14 others wounded. The loss of the Chinese is known to be ten times as great as ours.

To our marines fell the most difficult and dangerous portion of the defense, by reason of our proximity to the great city wall and the main city gates, over which large guns were planted.

Our legation, with the position which we held on the wall, was the key to the whole situation. This given up, all, including many Chinese Christians, would at once be drawn into the British legation and the congestion there increased by several hundred.

The United States marines acquitted themselves nobly. Twice were they driven from the wall and once forced to abandon the legation, but each time, re-enforced, immediately retook it, and with only a handful of men, aided by 10 Russian sailors and for a few days a few British marines, held it to the last against several hundred Chinese with at least three pieces of artillery.

The bravest and most successful event of the whole siege was an attack led by Captain Myers, of our marines, and 55 men—Americans, British, and Russians—which resulted in the capture of a formidable barricade on the wall defended by several hundred Chinese soldiers, over 50 of whom were killed. Two United States marines were killed and Captain Myers and 1 British marine wounded. This made our position on the wall secure, and it was held to the last with the loss of only one other man.

This position gave us command of a water gate under the wall, through which the entrance of the relief column was made into this, the Tartar city. The English arrived first, and General Chaffee, with the Fourteenth Infantry and Captain Riley's battery, a few moments thereafter.

I enclose a small rough plan showing the line of our defense on June 21 and on July 16 and thereafter.

During the siege the Belgian, Austrian, Italian, Dutch, and most of the French legations were burned, and the post-office, three foreign banks, residences and offices of all the customs officials, and all the missionary compounds, except the *Peitang*, have been totally destroyed. The *Peitang* is an immense Catholic cathedral connected with a very large school, in which were refugeed 1,500 native Christians. These, with Bishop Favier and a small corps of priests and sisters, were defended by 30 French and 10 Italian sailors and a number of Chinese Christians with arms. They were besieged during all the time we were, and no communication with them was at any time possible. This place was relieved on the 14th, and it was found that the besieged there had received even worse treatment than those at the legations—a French officer and 10 men killed and 8 wounded. One building was blown up by a mine, which killed 120 Chinese Christians.

No communication whatever was had with the *Tsungli Yamen* or anyone outside our legations until July 14, except communication by shot and shell.

It was a reasonable supposition that the Chinese Government had fled, abandoning the city to the fury of the fiendish soldiers. But we have since found proof abundant and absolute that the Empress Dowager and council remained in the city until just

before the arrival of the relief and that the attacks were organized and directed by them, the whole force being under the immediate control and direction of the Grand Secretary Jung Lu, the commander-in-chief of the Imperial army.

The *Tsungli Yamen*, all along, has charged all the trouble on the mob, bad Boxers, and brigands; at least, they did so up to the beginning of the siege. Since then they designated them by the name "people and militia," but the very first attacks, except the burning of buildings, were made upon us by men wearing the uniform of Chinese soldiers, and who, it was soon learned, belonged to the regular armies of General Tung Fu-hsiang or Jung Lu. Their barricades were everywhere mounted with flags bearing the name and designations of regular officers and their commands, and whenever men or guns fell into our hands they were those of the Chinese army.

It is very likely that Boxers joined them in the attacks, but if so, they donned the army uniform and carried the imperial arm.

From the decree of June 24, enclosed, you will see that the Boxers were organized by the appointment to their command of Prince Chuang and Kang I; that provisions were given them by an Imperial order, and the members of the imperial family urged not to fall behind them in acts of patriotism, etc. Decree of July 6 mentions the "Prince and ministers in command of the Boxers." Decree of July 8 gives the total number of troops, including the Boxers. Report of Viceroy Yu Lu of July 8 says he ordered provisions and firearms distributed among Boxers. By decree of June 25 the Empress Dowager gave 100,000 taels [Chinese currency] to the Boxers.

Another convincing proof that it was soldiers who were besieging us is the fact that whenever the Chinese Government wanted to communicate with us, they could stop the firing and come through their lines whenever they pleased.

The Chinese Government was pretending to us and proclaiming to the world that they were "protecting" us, when in fact if a thousandth part of the shots fired at us by their soldiers had taken effect we would all have been killed long ago. It is understood, also, that they represented abroad that they were "provisioning" us. They did send us on two occasions a few small watermelons, cucumbers, and egg plant, and on another three sacks of flour, but nothing more. We tried to establish a market where under a flag of truce, we might purchase a few eggs and some fruit or fresh meat. They consented, but the firing of their soldiers prevented it.

On July 14 a note signed "Prince Ching and others" came to us by a messenger again inviting us to ambush, this time at the *Tsungli Yamen*, but we didn't go. However, a correspondence was started, which for a time caused a cessation of artillery firing and lessened greatly the rifle firing, showing that the Government could control it if desired.

All the correspondence is interesting, and I enclose translations of it for what it is worth. Two days before the arrival of our troops "Prince Ching and others" asked to come and see us for the purpose of arranging a temporary suspension of hostilities, requesting us to name an hour, which was done for 11 a.m., the 13th of August. They did not come, saying they were too busy, but that strict orders had been given to their troops not to fire upon us and if anybody did they would be court-martialed, etc. But during all that night the most fierce and desperate attack of the whole siege was made along the entire line, in which one German soldier was killed and a Russian, Japanese, and American sailor were wounded. * * * On the 14th, as I have already written, we were relieved.

I enclose various extracts from the official gazettes, decrees, etc., which prove conclusively the connection of the Imperial Government with and its responsibility for the Boxer movement, and furnish very strong evidence that it was planned, encouraged, and supported by the imperial family. Prince Tuan, the father of the heir apparent, has been their chief friend and protector. They have drilled and rationed in his temple, his son was selected as heir apparent about the inception of the movement, the prince was appointed to the *Tsungli Yamen* at its height, and it seems certain that his advice and that of the grand secretary Hsu Tung, Kang I, and other influential but ignorant anti-foreign officials, influenced the Empress Dowager to actually believe that with the combined force of Boxers and soldiers the expulsion or extermination of all foreigners from China was possible.

So the movement began, first upon the native Christians, thousands of whom have been most brutally butchered, then against the missionaries, many of whom have been murdered and their property destroyed. The most harrowing details are coming in of horrible atrocities perpetrated in the country districts while we have been besieged; then against the foreign merchants and all foreign business interests, and finally against all the official representatives of foreign powers in Peking. * * *

The Government has fled, and up to the present no one to speak for it has put in an appearance. It is, however, known that several members of the *Tsungli Yamen* are in the city, and it is creditably reported that Prince Ching is not far away; so the probability is that some of them will soon be heard from. Further developments will be reported in my next dispatch

I cannot close this dispatch without gratefully mentioning the splendid service performed by the United States marines who arrived here on May 31 under the command of Captain Myers. With slight exceptions their conduct won the admiration and gratitude of all, and I beg you to kindly communicate the fact to the Navy Department.

I enclose copy of resolutions passed by the American missionaries expressing their high appreciation of the loyalty, fidelity, and heroic courage of these men.

The loss to the American missions in China is something tremendous, for there is probably not one of their houses, schools, or chapels in this or the province immediately west of here undestroyed, and many in the north part of Shantung have also been demolished. It is reasonably certain that the missionaries who did not leave the interior before the middle of June have all been murdered. We cannot as yet get accurate information of them here.

The damage to the general missionary cause is immeasurable and irretrievable. Adequate indemnities may possibly be secured for all material losses, but time only, with the most substantial guaranties for the future, can even partially restore the desolated field. Just how this can be accomplished does not at present clearly appear, but if the reformation or reestablishment of government here, it should somehow be brought about.

As showing the uniform cordiality existing between the missionaries and this legation, I take pleasure in transmitting herewith copy of a letter signed by all the male missionaries here.

I ought to add in regard to the note from *Tsungli Yamen* of July 19, in which was transmitted to me a copy of the telegraphic imperial letter to the President of the United States, that almost identical letters were at the same time sent to the Queen of England, the Emperor of Germany, the Czar of Russia, and the President of France, saying in each case that in her present difficulties China could rely only upon that special power for aid.

I have the honor to be, etc.,

E. H. CONGER

Source

United States Department of State, Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs,
1899